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AUTHOR Pearson, Judy C.
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the influence of sex on perceived credibility. It was predicted that males would have more credibility than females, and that males and females would respond differently to the question of having more credibility if they were of the opposite sex. A series of research questions concerning both the similarity of sex of the stimulus and the receiver and the influence of the sex of the interviewer on the subject were posed; and the variables of competence, trustworthiness, dynamism, and coorientation were examined. Subjects were 145 men and 160 women randomly selected from the local telephone directory of a midwestern university town. Each subject was interviewed by phone by a male or female interviewer. The results indicated that (1) men were perceived to have more credibility than women; (2) men felt they would have less credibility if they were women, and women felt they would have more credibility if they were men; (3) subjects responding to female interviewers selected males as being more credible at a significantly higher level than they selected females; (4) men were perceived to be more competent than women, but women were perceived to be more trustworthy than men; (5) men were perceived to be higher in dynamism than women, but women were perceived to be higher in coorientation than men; and (6) both men and women perceived that they would have more credibility with persons of the same sex than with persons of the opposite sex. (HTH)

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THE ROLE OF GENDER IN SOURCE CREDIBILITY

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Judy C. Pearson
Associate Professor
School of Interpersonal Communication
Ohio University
Athens, Ohio 45701
614/594-5583

CS504111

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The importance of source credibility is at least twenty-three centuries old. The Aristotelian dictum that a source's "character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses," (Aristotle, 1941, 1356a, lines 12-14) has been expanded recently in experimental studies which have attempted to determine more precise information about source credibility. A prevalent view in such studies is that source credibility is a perceptual variable in which the source serves as a stimulus and the receivers serve as respondents. In line with this view, the multidimensionality of the construct has been examined. The number of dimensions and the names of those dimensions varies among studies (cf. Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; McCroskey, 1966; and McCroskey & Wheeless, 1976). One of the most recent studies suggests that credibility consists of four dimensions: competence, trustworthiness, dynamism, and coorientation (Tuppens, 1974). Competence refers to a receiver's perception of the source's expertise, knowledge, and background information; trustworthiness is a dimension that focuses on honesty, sincerity, and consistency; dynamism involves the source's energy and ethusiasm; and coorientation is the extent to which the source and the receiver can establish and maintain a similarity of ideas beliefs and experiences (Nelson & Pearson, 1981).

The lack of stability among the factor analytic studies that have been performed may be a result of a number of causes. First, researchers have generated items based on previous literature

which has suggested a particular theoretical orientation and has limited the number and kinds of factors that could be generated. For instance, McCroskey (1966) selected adjectives for his study from a review of the literature in which expertise and trustworthiness had been identified as the two primary components of credibility. Not surprisingly, McCroskey found two factors: authoritativeness and character. A second cause for differences among the factors that have been generated lies in the lack of freedom that subjects have to select criteria by which sources will be judged. In other words, subjects are constrained to use the descriptors selected by researchers. Finally, subjects are not asked to respond to an individual source, but rather a complex set of variables that includes a source at a particular point in time, with a particular topic, a specific message, in a unique communication situation. The variability in subjects' responses may be a result of any of these factors. Attributions of source credibility may, in fact, be in error as subjects are responding to other variables in the communication process.

Equivocal findings concerning female/male differences appear to occur in the source credibility literature. In general, persons with high status, including men and anglo-Americans, have been shown to be more effective as persuaders

and as writers and have been favored for high status positions while persons with low status, including women, Mexican Americans, and blacks, have been viewed less favorably (cf. Ramirez, 1977; Noel & Allen, 1976; Wheeler, Wilson, & Tarantala, 1976; & De La Zerda & Hopper, 1979). Such conclusions have been drawn even when messages are identical which have led researchers to speculate that women, among other groups, have lower credibility than have men. A frequently cited study demonstrated that audiences responded more favorably to messages attributed to a male communicator than to a female communicator (Goldberg, 1968). Male sources of messages also received higher competence ratings than did female sources in an investigation of persuasive discourse (Miller & McReynolds, 1973). However, in another study, females received higher scores on three dimensions of credibility that were examined--trustworthiness, dynamism, and competence (Vigliano, 1974). In addition, while male newscasters were shown to be more effective than female newscasters in producing retention of newscast materials, there were no significant differences between male and female newscasters on believability (Tan, Raudy, Huff, & Miles, 1980).

One possible explanation for the differences in the attribution of credibility to female and male sources may lie in the difference between extrinsic and intrinsic credibility. Extrinsic credibility refers to that view of the source that a receiver holds prior to discourse; intrinsic credibility arises out of the communication event. The characteristics of an individual including his or her personality, sex, or prior reputation may affect a receiver's view of his or her credibility before the communication event. For example, in the examination of persuasive discourse which was cited above, the topic of the message was expanding the A. B. M. missile system and the source was identified alternatively as a man or a woman with a Ph. D. in nuclear physics (Miller & McReynolds, 1973). Respondents in this study may have been reacting to the sex of the source of the message (extrinsic credibility) or to the combination of the sex of the source and the hypothetical academic degree and topic of the message. In other words, receivers may view men as more competent when they are presenting messages which are consistent with a stereotypical role, but may view women as more competent when they are speaking on traditionally female topics. For instance, if the message concerned childcare or a nurturing role, a female may have been viewed as more competent.

The literature on the differential grading of female and male student speeches further compounds the problem. An examination of the evaluation of the messages of women and men consistently demonstrates that females receiver higher scores on classroom speeches (cf. Pearson, 1980; Pearson & Nelson, 1981; Barker, 1966). In addition, female students receive proportionately more positive comments than negative comments than do male students (cf. Pearson, 1975; Sprague, 1971). However, other studies demonstrate no difference in the public speaking of female and male speakers: one study showed that sex did not correlate significantly with public speaking ability ratings but that women did receive higher grades in the basic speech communication classroom (Hayes, 1977), and another study yielded no difference in the persuasiveness of female and male speakers (Sloman, 1974). It has been suggested that women may be uniquely suited for the public speaking setting or that women may be especially responsive to the classroom setting. Stereotypical characteristics such as sensitivity to the needs of others, understanding, compassion, and warmth which are associated with women may assist them in the public speaking setting while feminine personality traits including compliance, yielding, and responsiveness may assist women in achieving higher grades in the classroom.

The literature on differential grading of female and male sources in the classroom does not offer conclusive evidence,

but it clearly suggests that intervening variables can alter the perception of men and women engaged in communication behaviors in different settings. One of the purposes of the current study was to examine the credibility of men and women, without regard to context. Based on previous literature and inferring that the superiority of women in particular contexts of communication was a result of the context rather than the gender of the source, we hypothesized that

H_1: Men will be perceived to have more credibility than women.

Similarly, we felt that men would perceive that their credibility would be lower if they were of the opposite sex while women would perceive that their credibility would be higher if they were of the opposite sex. In other words, holding other characteristics constant, men and women would respond that their credibility would be altered by the single change of gender. We therefore hypothesized that

H_2: Men and women will respond differently to the question of having more credibility if they were of the opposite sex.

Both female and male interviewers were involved in conducting this study. Earlier studies suggest that the gender of the interviewer or the experimenter may affect the results (cf. Bock & Bock, 1977; Brooks, 1974) while other studies conclude that the gender of the interviewer is not a significant factor

(cf. Chelune, 1976; Hoffman-Graff, 1977; Vondracek & Vondracek, 1971; Hoffman & Spencer, 1977). As a result of these conflicting findings, we examined the sex of the interviewer and included the research question,

R_1: Does the sex of the interviewer affect the selection of men or women as more credible?

In addition to intervening variables, another explanation for the differences in the findings of previous research that has considered the credibility of female and male sources may lie in the different dimensions which have been examined. For instance, some of the studies have examined competence, others have used three dimensions of credibility as predictors, while others have simply measured global favorability toward the message. The persuasibility of a message or the favorability of a message for a receiver may be an inappropriate dependent measure in studies which examine source credibility. Overall source credibility is appropriate and studies which further analyze credibility into its various dimensions provide more useful results.

An additional purpose or this study was to examine the extrinsic credibility of female and male sources by comparing subjects' responses to women and men on the four dimensions of credibility that have been identified. Research in areas outside the source credibility area allow hypotheses concerning the differences that might be found on the dimensions of

competence, trustworthiness, dynamism, and coorientation. We will review the relevant literature in each of these areas before offering specific hypotheses.

Competence. Men appear to be perceived as more competent than women as we examine the literature in psychology, sociology, and communication. Bem found that characteristics like analytical, leadership abilities, makes decisions easily, self-sufficient, and acts as a leader were identified with a masculine sex role in her development of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). Others have concluded, as well, that men are considered to be objective, active, competitive, logical, worldly, and self-confident which suggests a picture of competency (Gillen & Sherman, 1980). Socialization processes seem to encourage individuals to perceive men as more competent than women. For example, one study demonstrated that in childhood there is greater pressure toward self-reliance and striving for achievement for boys than for girls (Barry, Bacon, & Child, 1957). In a second study, two researchers demonstrated that, even at the preschool age, boys perceive that they belong to a different sex category than do their mothers and are highly motivated not to become feminine, but rather to acquire masculine characteristics. Their results showed that pre-school age girls do not have the same strong motivation to acquire feminine sex role characteristics (Lynn & DePalma-Cross, 1974). Finally, another author concludes that despite all of the advances for women, their self-images are challenged in a

number of ways. She suggests that women may feel incompetent for a variety of reasons: parental disappointment over having a girl rather than a boy, societal pressure which mitigates against a woman's perception of an ideal body type, the threat that women provide to men in many arenas, and the competitive nature of our culture (Deutsch, 1970).

Communication research tends to support the notion that men are perceived to be more competent than women, but the results provide some conflicting evidence. Male sources of messages received higher competence ratings than did female sources in an investigation of persuasive discourse (Miller & McReynolds, 1973). Another researcher found that male sources were judged slightly superior on competence, but not significantly so (Widgery, 1974). Finally, one study demonstrated that female sources obtained significantly higher scores on competence than did male sources (Vigliano, 1974). Although there is some confusion with regard to sex differences with this dimension of credibility, it is hypothesized that

H_3: Men will be perceived to be more competent than will women.

Trustworthiness. In a summary of psychological sex differences, Sherman concludes that "older girls and women are more dependent, conforming, and less willing to take risks" (Sherman, 1971, p. 14). Similarly, the Bem Sex Role Inventory includes items like loyal, gullible, childlike, and gentle for women which suggests

a kind of trustworthiness (Bem, 1974). Bennett and Cohen (1959) contrast the personality patterns of men and women and note that men think that personal success is better proof of their ability to survive unpleasant social conditions while feminine thinking finds more value in freedom from restraint in a friendly and pleasant environment. Socialization may explain why women appear to be more trustworthy than men. In childhood women have more pressure toward nurturance, obedience, and responsibility while stresses for self-reliance and striving for achievement exist for little boys (cf. Barry, Bacon & Child, 1957).

Research in the speech communication classroom has provided results that are consistent with psychological sex differences and socialization processes. In two studies, female sources were shown to receive higher scores on trustworthiness, or safety, than were male sources (Vigliano, 1974; Widgery, 1974). One researcher has suggested that while men are judged in their public speaking in the classroom on such characteristics as verbal comprehension and general reasoning, women may be judged highly because of different skills and abilities (Ball, 1958). One potential explanation may lie in the characteristic of trustworthiness. It is therefore hypothesized that

H_4: Women will be perceived to be more trustworthy than will men.

Dynamism. When Bem was creating her sex role instrument, she found that characteristics like athletic, assertive, forceful,

and aggressive were used by individuals to describe men (Bem, 1974). In another study, children identified male characters by such descriptors as aggressive, strong, adventurous, dominant, coarse, and ambitious (Cicone, 1978). In a study on teacher's perceptions of the acceptability of stereotypically masculine and feminine traits, both male and female teachers demonstrated a preference for stereotypically feminine traits including gentleness, obedience, neatness, being quiet, pleasant, and cooperative (Schneider & Coutts, 1979).

Women are less physically active and more sedentary from birth onward (Sherman, 1971). Men are more active in interpersonal communication exchanges. They talk more frequently, they talk for longer periods of time when they have the floor, and they interrupt others more than do women (cf. Kester, 1972; Zimmerman & West, 1975). Men order, command, interrogate and declare while women comply, acquiesce, reply and agree (cf. Eakins & Eakins, 1978). While male sources are determined to be rated higher on dynamism than are female sources (Widgery, 1974), females tend to view themselves as more animated than are males in their communication style (Talley & Richmond, 1980). We may therefore hypothesize that

H_5: Men will be perceived to be more dynamic than are women.

Coorientation. Women are characterized as sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others, understanding, compassionate,

eager to soothe hurt feelings, and warm (Bem, 1974). In general, feminine traits have been found to reflect warmth and expressiveness (Gillen, 1980). Females tend to be more loving toward other females while males tend to be least loving toward other males (Small, Gross, Erdwins & Gessner, 1979). In interpersonal communication, men tend to pro-act while women tend to react (Strodtbeck & Mann, 1956). Women perceive themselves as more attentive in interpersonal communication (Talley & Richmond, 1980). Co-orientation may be another factor on which female sources are judged highly, but which has not been specifically identified (Ball, 1958). It is therefore hypothesized that

H_6: Women will be perceived to be higher in coorientation than will men.

Another variable which may be confounding the differences in attribution of source credibility to women and men may be the sex of the receiver. Returning to the literature on classroom criticism, the sex of the evaluator appears to have some predictive value in the determination of grades. A number of studies suggest that females are more lenient as evaluators (cf. Pfister, 1955; Sikkink, 1956; Bock, Powell, Kitchens, & Flavin, 1976) while other research could demonstrate no difference in the evaluation offered by female and male evaluators (cf. Bryan & Wilke, 1942; Ruechelle, 1958; Bostrom & Kemp, 1968; Sloman, 1974; Pearson, 1980a). Studies in the classroom which have focused on specific critiquing behavior have demonstrated that females are more generous than males

in rating the ethos of a speaker (Haiman, 1949), that females tend to score speakers, regardless of sex, higher than males on trustworthiness and dynamism, but not on competence (Vigliano, 1974); and that females write more delivery, positive and personal comments than do males in their written speech criticism (Sprague, 1971). Finally, Lynn (1974) found that 1) females tend to perceive highly credible sources unassociated with any message more favorably than do males, while males tend to perceive positive communication from highly credible sources more favorably than do females; 2) females tend to perceive source-less subjective messages more favorably than do males, while males tend to perceive source-less objective messages more favorably than do females; and 3) males perceive subjective messages more favorably when the source is specifically identified than when the source is unknown, while females perceive subjective messages more favorably when the source is not identified.

The interaction between the gender of the evaluator, or receiver, and the gender of the speaker, or source, has also been examined in classroom criticism. It appears that women tend to grade men higher than they grade women (Pfister, 1955) and that men tend to grade women higher than they grade men (Pfister, 1955) in some research, but other studies have not replicated these findings (cf. Pearson, 1980b).

Research on similarity between sources and receivers is useful in examining source credibility. Individuals tend

to extend more positive affect for those whom they judge to be similar to themselves than for those whom they perceive to be dissimilar from themselves (cf. Heider, 1958) and positive affect leads to perceptions of perceived similarity (cf. Byrne & Wong, 1962). Similarity results in interpersonal attraction (cf. Newcomb, 1961; Byrne & Nelson, 1965; Byrne & Clore, 1966). Receiver-source similarity has been shown to produce attitude change (cf. Berscheid, 1966; Brock, 1965; Mills & Jellison, 1968). Further, perceived similarity is related to attraction and some of the dimensions of credibility (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1971; Rogers, 1973; Alpert & Anderson, 1973). Consistent with these findings, perceived source competence was shown to be consistently the best predictor of selective exposure behavior with homophily and attitudinal involvement adding to the predictive model (Wheeless, 1974). Finally, persons have been shown to be more easily persuaded by peers than by non-peers (Cantor, Alfonso, & Zillman, 1976) and preschool male children demonstrate a preference for their fathers over their mothers in play activities (Lynn & DePalma-Cross, 1974).

In light of the conflicting findings between the classroom setting and the research on similarity, we offer the following four research questions.

R_2: Do individuals perceive that they will have higher credibility with persons of the same sex of with persons of the opposite sex?

R_3: Does the sex of the subject affect the selection of the same sex or the opposite sex with whom she or he would have more credibility?

R_4: Do individuals perceive that others will have more credibility with them if they are of the same sex than if they are of the opposite sex?

R_5: Does the sex of the subject affect the selection of a person of the same sex or the opposite sex who will have more credibility with them?

METHOD

Data Collection

The subjects in this study were randomly selected from the local telephone directory of residents of a middle-sized midwestern university town. The final subject pool consisted of 305 individuals; 145 men and 160 women; 209 students and 96 non-students; 205 individuals were 25 years of age or younger and 140 individuals were over 25 years of age. Each subject was contacted by telephone by a trained interviewer. Twelve of the interviewers were male and eight of the interviewers were female; each interviewer completed about 15 interviews. The interviewers were trained and supervised by the investigator to insure that they conducted the interviews consistently. Interviewers were instructed to read questions verbatim and were advised on responses to particular questions. The telephone interviews were conducted

between February 2 and February 5, 1981, in the late afternoon and early evening hours.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire that provided the basis for the telephone interviews was based on the research questions and hypotheses that were developed in this study. Interviewers recorded their own sex, the sex of the interviewee, whether the interviewee was a student or a nonstudent, and placed the interviewee in an age category. Interviewees then answered twelve questions. Four questions had dichotomous responses: 1) In your view, which have more credibility with others: a) Men or b) Women? 2) If you were the opposite sex, would you be viewed as having a) More credibility or b) Less credibility? 3) Do you feel you have more credibility with the a) Opposite sex or b) Same sex? 4) Do others have more credibility with you if they are of the a) Opposite sex or b) Same sex?

Eight of the questions were measured by the use of five-point likert-type scales which ranged from very high, high, moderate, low, and very low. These eight questions included 1) How would you rate the overall competence of women? 2) How would you rate the overall competence of men? 3) How would you rate the overall trustworthiness of men? 4) How would you rate the overall trustworthiness of women? 5) How would you rate the overall dynamism of women? 6) How would you rate the overall dynamism of men? 7) How would

you rate the overall coorientation of women? and 8) How would you rate the overall coorientation of men? These ten questions were organized in ten different random ways to help control for order effects.

Data Analyses

Hypothesis 2 and research questions 1, 3, and 5 were examined using regression analysis and the general linear models procedure from the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) which provides Type IV Sum of Squares, a conservative estimate of difference. The dependent variable for hypothesis 2 was the credibility assigned to a person of the opposite sex and the independent variable was the sex of the respondent. The dependent variable for research question 1 was the credibility score assigned to men and women and the independent variable was the sex of the interviewer. The dependent variable for research questions 3 and 5 was the credibility assigned to same sex or opposite sex persons and the independent variable was the sex of the respondent. Hypotheses 1, 3 through 6, and research questions 2 and 4 were examined with t-tests.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1--Men will be perceived to have more credibility that women--was verified. Two hundred and thirteen subjects selected men as higher in credibility than women, 85 selected women over men, and 7 subjects asserted that they could not select

either men or women as more credibile which accounted for a significant difference ($t = 15.30$, 298 d.f., $p < .0001$).

Hypothesis 2--Men and women will respond differently to the question of having more credibility if they were of the opposite sex--was verified. The variable of sex provided a significant difference ($F(1, 297) = 34.88$; $p < .0001$). In general, men felt they would have less credibility if they were of the opposite sex and women felt they would have more credibility if they were of the opposite sex.

Research Question 1--Does the sex of the experimenter affect the selection of men or women as more credible--was answered affirmatively. Subjects who responded to female experimenters selected males as more credibile at a significantly higher level than they selected females as more credible ($F(1, 293) = 4.14$; $p = .0429$).

Hypothesis 3--Men will be perceived to be higher in competence than will women--was verified. This significant finding ($t = 5.99$, 304 d.f., $p < .001$) demonstrates that men are viewed as more competent than are women.

Hypothesis 4--Women will be perceived to be higher in trustworthiness than are men--was affirmed. Women were judged to be significantly higher in trustworthiness than were men ($t = 5.28$, 304 d.f., $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 5--Men will be perceived to be higher in dynamism than are women--was verified. Men were judged to be significantly higher in dynamism than were women ($t = 11.15$, 303 d.f., $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 6--Women will be perceived to be higher in coorientation than will men--was affirmed. Women were judged to be significantly higher in coorientation than were men ($t = 7.32$, 302 d.f., $p < .001$).

Research Question 2--Do individuals perceive that they will have higher credibility with persons of the same sex or with persons of the opposite sex--was answered affirmatively. One hundred and ninety four subjects selected the same sex, 103 subjects selected the opposite sex, and 8 subjects chose neither the same nor the opposite sex which accounted for a significant difference ($t = 59.76$, 297 d.f., $p < .0001$).

Research Question 3--Does the sex of the subject affect the selection of the same sex or the opposite sex with whom she or he would have more credibility--was not answered in the affirmative ($F(1,295) = 1.51$; $p = .2195$).

Research Question 4--Do individuals perceive that others will have more credibility with them if they are of the same sex than if they are of the opposite sex--was answered affirmatively. Two hundred and two subjects selected the same sex, 98 subjects selected the opposite sex, and 5 subjects chose neither the same nor the opposite sex which accounted for a significant difference ($t = 61.32$, 300 d.f., $p < .0001$).

Research Question 5--Does the sex of the subject affect the selection of a person of the same sex or the opposite sex who will have more credibility with them--was answered affirmatively ($F(1,292) = 6.97$; $p = .0087$).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study support the view that both the gender of the source and the similarity of gender between the source and the receiver affect the receiver's perception of source credibility. Men appear to have more overall credibility than do women, women appear to recognize that they would have more credibility if they were men, and men appear to recognize that they would have less credibility if they were women. Men are significantly higher than women on the dimensions of credibility that have been labeled competence and dynamism. Women, on the other hand, are viewed as significantly higher on the dimensions of trustworthiness and coorientation. Individuals perceive that they will have higher credibility with others of the same sex than with others of the opposite sex, regardless of their own gender. Individuals perceive that others will have more credibility with them if they are of the same sex than if they are of the opposite sex; however, a gender difference on this variable also exists which suggests that men find that others of the same sex are significantly more credible than do women find that others of the same sex are credible.

Previous equivocal findings in this area may be due to the treatment of source credibility as a unidimensional construct or as the contamination of source credibility with other communication variables including message topic, context, or

audience expectation. A large number of studies on source credibility have focused on the criteria of source credibility and on determining the dimensions of the construct. Additional research might be posed which utilizes the criteria or dimensions that have been established to determine the functions that credibility serves in the general process of communication. Further conceptualization in this area may consider the impact of source gender on such variables as context, attribution, and receiver expectations in the communication process.

This study suggests some additional avenues for future research. On the one hand, it appears that men and women are perceived to exist in superior-subordinate roles with regard to source credibility. The power relationship that exists between men and women in our culture affects the nature of the perceptions of credibility. Stereotyping may be operative as individuals make assessments of the credibility of persons on the basis of known power situations. On the other other hand, individuals appear to rely on principles such as homophily, psychological propinquity, and similarity in drawing conclusions of their own credibility with others. Subcultural groups may find that their credibility is enhanced when communicating with members of their own subculture regardless of the dominant power structure in the larger culture. At any rate, it does not appear that the overriding asymmetrical power relationship which currently exists between men and women is the only influence in determining the source credibility of individuals in our culture.

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